

Kriti Film Club: #thoughtprovokingcinema for Social Change

Aanchal Kapur

IN 1999, I along with some co-travellers in the field of gender & development and human rights activism formed a not-for-profit organization to facilitate creative thought and action in the Indian social sector. We named it “Kriti, a development praxis and communication team,” defining what we stood for in our very nomenclature, and began to work out of India’s capital city, New Delhi. The Kriti Team (as we like to call ourselves) aimed at offering capacity-building, design and communication support and knowledge resources to small and big non-profit organizations with a gender, development and human rights perspective.

We were aware of India’s documentary culture (often underground) which goes back to the freedom struggle period (1857–1947) and the days of the Emergency (1975–1977). I grew up watching black and white documentary reels that played before every Hindi (read Bollywood) film was shown on single-screen theaters across the country; as well as at Delhi’s Sapru house (at that time, a hub for children’s cinema). My parents made sure I got to see these films every Wednesday and Saturday during our summer breaks to my paternal grandparents’ home in New Delhi. Interestingly at my maternal grandparents home, I saw photos and slides of the political struggle and witnessed some live actions of workers rights’ struggles led by my trade-unionist maternal grandfather—all in a way preparing me for the years to follow.

While in college, studying political science and engaging with the autonomous women’s movement and other activism, I was exposed to issue-based documentaries that brought me closer to the real worlds of the people I committed to work with in the future. I was introduced to, at that time, the women filmmakers who started “Mediastorm” and was deeply inspired by them as a young woman and of course, as a documentary viewer. In my undergraduate and postgraduate years, I was also introduced to the work of Adoor Gopalakrishnan at my alma mater, Lady Shriram College, and his involvement with documentaries in the political climate of Kerala.

When I started working full-time in the early nineties, as a social activist and gender trainer, I began to use films for learning and capacity-building of the development workers and people I was engaging with. This need emerged as I personally found it repetitive, (sometimes) boring and challenging (due to literacy issues of communities) to continually use role plays, reading materials and discussions to enable mindset and behavioral change at the field level. One of the amazing archives that I was able to access at the time (put together through the efforts of some individual filmmakers) was CENDIT, a one-of-its kind space where documentary films could be found (but only if you knew). Little did I realize then that all this exposure would, thirty years later, have me penning down this story of my life and times with documentary films. In fact, it is important that I mention here Kailash-ji, one of the CENDIT members who has been a big back-end support (providing access to equipment on hire, editing, recording, converting footage into DVDs, etc.) to independent filmmakers in the country as well as my efforts at accessing documentary films and filmmakers over the years.

This was a decade before founding Kriti Team in 1999, when I continued to access and use documentaries for our development support work. I felt that their value and critical role as a medium for social change were not recognized, and not explored as medium for change as much as they could be. It was not easy to find documentary films in those days, not only because there was no online search mechanism but also because the few films being made were seen by a few selected audience and producers, and then found place on office shelves or drawers. Over the years, I could see that, even though more and more documentaries were being produced, they were not accessible to public audiences and were “not being seen and shown outside of (existing and emerging) film festivals.”¹

These experiences led to the *initiation of the Kriti Film Club* to promote the use of documentaries for social change. Kriti is a Hindi word that means “creation.” The first screening was held in August 2000 at Alaknanda (New Delhi), on a second-hand, 24-inch TV set and the discussion went on longer than the screening duration! While it was true that the size of the screen was not always what the filmmakers wanted to show their labor of love on, the fact that we continued to screen every month non-stop without any funding or projects, kept the films and filmmakers coming. It was a beginning that is completing two decades this August 2020.

The Kriti Film Club screenings moved to a 27-inch TV in 2008 and then to a two-screen public space at the India Habitat Centre (IHC) in New Delhi in 2010. Over the years, we also organized screenings at schools, colleges and local community spaces either as educational or mobilizational activities on important days such as Women's Day, Environment Day, Hiroshima-Nagasaki Day, Peace Day, Human Rights Day, etc.

We had set ourselves quite an agenda as we wanted to screen a documentary a month and the search began. In the early 2000s, there was no "google," so it was word of mouth, e-mails, reaching out to known filmmakers, civil society organizations and tapping the few film festivals going around. The Kriti Team workplace became the Kriti Film Club's homespace. The venue was small, the equipment basic and the finances nil. What was in plenty was the passion and commitment to screen socially relevant and thought-provoking cinema. Reaching out to known filmmakers and documentaries that I had used for my trainings was the way to go initially, as also accessing organizations I got to know as producers of documentaries (several strange coincidences and stories to tell on the search too). I was quoted in an article saying:²

We have had as many as 80 people jostling for space, standing in the corridors to watch our films, and we have never stopped even if only two people turned up, because for us the consistency of our work is of utmost importance.

Documentary Film Screenings: Keeping it Regular and Engaging

The Kriti Film Club has been screening documentary films at least once a month (sometimes more) since 2000. The films cover a range of issues connected with development, human rights and social attitudes/ trends. Started as an accessible, informal, neighborhood film club, we show documentary films made by amateur and professional filmmakers, young and old hands from India, South Asia and other regions of the world. It has provided a space for brainstorming and sharing on issues among the viewers, including those involved in people's movements and civil society organizations.

The whole idea of the Kriti Film Club has been to place "thought-provoking cinema" in a discussion group that will help to deepen the understanding of social, development and human rights issues among viewers and

filmmakers. It has been an attempt to create a forum where students, activists, academicians, development professionals, media professionals and friends can come together and interact, through meaningful cinema. It also helps increase access of these films to a larger audience beyond film festivals and special screenings, as it keeps copies of the films in a library and some even for sale at its workplace after the screenings. These efforts are aimed at making the Kriti Film Club a place of rendezvous and meeting new people, especially the “non-converted” (i.e., those members of the public [educated or not] who may not have the exposure and/or sensitivity towards real-life concerns of the resource-poor and marginalized citizens of India).

From 2000 until 2010, the Kriti Film Club screened documentary and socially relevant mainstream films on the third Saturday evening of every month (sometimes more than once) at its workplace in New Delhi, and since 2010 it began organizing monthly screenings at the IHC, which is an open-to-public cultural space available for a variety of visual and performing art events.



A Children's Day special screening at the Kriti Film Club homespace in New Delhi.

What has been really exciting is the open-hearted support provided by the Habitat program team over these years, in giving us the space for regular screenings and outreach of documentary film-based interactions with a diverse audience, members of IHC, policy makers, bureaucrats, retired people, teachers, media persons, artists, filmmakers, people from corporate and civil society organizations, students, academicians, etc. While it may appear that the space is not always “open” to ordinary citizens by its very location and “upper class” feel (partly a reality) to it, we have tried to make our screenings inclusive to audiences across class and community. Some of our most exciting screenings at the IHC have been with children and youth from Delhi’s slums as well as social movement activists.

As far as possible, the Kriti Film Club has always invited the filmmaker to be present at the screening so that the audience interaction is insightful and useful for all present. We believe that the filmmakers’ engagement with the audience is key to the impact that the viewership creates, and that the process also influences hopefully the filmmakers’ journey in documentary filmmaking.



Arundhati Roy at the screening of *Daughter of Nepal* at India Habitat Center.

Along with the ongoing monthly IHC screenings, the Kriti Film Club homepage was restarted in March 2018 by some volunteers, with one film screening organized every fortnight or month as much as possible. In fact, through these twenty years, almost all our screenings have continued to take



Women's Day special screening at Kriti Film Club, March 2018.



Young girls trained as filmmakers in urban slums of Delhi, at a Kriti Film Club screening of their short films, March 2018.



Kriti Film Club showing of short films by Ankur Collective, March 2018.

place only because at least one team member (Lata Chaudhary) or a volunteer has taken charge either of the logistics and/ or the publicity and facilitation of the Kriti Film Club gathering.

The Kriti Film Club continues to offer curation and screening events at schools and colleges, and on request from development organizations and people's movements, in solidarity and support for their work at the community level.

Kriti Film Club has and continues to inspire several individuals and organizations to start local neighborhood film clubs in their communities of work, institutions and cities. We believe that these small steps have contributed towards enhancing the reach of documentaries made by independent filmmakers, documentary producers and development organizations from across India and parts of the world to people and places that they had not yet gone to.

Curating and Going Beyond the Screenings

While the main content of documentaries showcased by the Kriti Film Club has included issues directly affecting India's marginalized populations, larger concerns related to India's economy, environment, politics, development, education, health, women and children's rights, etc. have also been taken up by documentary filmmakers.

The Kriti Film Club has, over these two decades, gone beyond showcasing documentaries to creating a body of knowledge and action; a perspective and thought process that would impact people in their attitudes and behaviors on important social, gender, environment, development and human rights issues. Its aim has been to encourage and inspire community-based work to make its audience to realize the power of change that lies within each of them. Over the years, it began to serve as a walk-into film club and an informal screening space outside of the realm of film festivals and even as a space for students to go to watch films as research material either for content or for filmmaking interests.

The need to create a documentary culture that is open for all irrespective of gender, age, class, caste, religion, ability or occupation, has motivated us to keep at it, despite limitations of financial and human resources at hand.

Gradually, and over the years, the Kriti Film Club has been welcomed as a hub for different independent filmmakers—young and old; amateur

and accomplished; known and unknown—to screen their documentaries with our growing and interested viewers. Some of these filmmakers include Anand Patwardhan, Sanjay Kak, Amar Kanwar, Samina Mishra, Rahul Roy, Shreeprakash, Krishnendu Bose, Saba Dewan, Ajay Bhardwaj, Shikha Jhingan, Sabina Kidwai, Paromita Vohra, Aparna Sanyal, Anandana Kapur, Reena Mohan, Nirmal Chander, Sushmit Ghosh and the names have just kept adding. From having to search for a documentary to screen, the Kriti Film Club has been spoilt by a queue of requests to screen documentaries made by filmmakers across the country. One of our early connects for accessing documentaries was the Prasar Bharti Broadcasting Trust (PSBT) which had begun in early 2000s to produce independent documentaries, providing the much-needed funding to documentary filmmakers in the country to make moving images on issues and was happy to find an interested screening partner without monetization demands! For the Kriti Film Club, the availability of these documentaries was an important resource to tap too, even though the films were often more development mainstream (in the initial years especially) than human rights or struggle-oriented which was our first choice.

Post-film discussions have and continue to be core to each screening, facilitated either by the filmmaker (if present) or me and my colleagues and volunteers. The Kriti Film Club was conscious about not losing sight of its primary objective—creating space for conversations and actions on important public (and often political) issues. It has aligned the documentary curation with the parent organization's (Kriti Team) vision to unpack and document people's movements for human rights for the new generation of social workers, students and other civil society practitioners. Bringing documentaries to protest sites, college spaces, activist and civil society events has been a norm.

Over the years, the Kriti Film Club has been a witness to a lot more film screening events being organized by many other people and organizations, and there has been a mushrooming of documentary film festivals too. It has tried to retain its foundational principles to be a platform that enables the reach of documentary films. It has been reached by several starting film festivals for collaborations, recommendations and publicity including the Jeevika Livelihood Film Festival, the Dharamsala Film Festival, Vibgyor Film Festival and the Auroville Film Festival, among others. These partnerships have led me to be a member of the Jury at some festivals, the Kriti Film Club

nominating documentaries for festivals and/or organizing preview or post festival screenings. The Kriti Film Club has been open to recommending documentaries for film festivals (and has been asked for recommendations) due to its own database and camaraderie with filmmakers. We do recognize the value of documentaries entering festivals as long as we can continue to screen them and share them widely. But sometimes the wait for documentaries to finish the festival circuit gets frustrating for me, especially when I see the “issue” and “content” of the film to be topical and contextual to a time and space.



Academics and development practitioners at a recent Kriti Film Club screening (at IHC) on the lives of women in Kashmir.

Over the years, several individuals, community groups and student bodies have got in touch with the Kriti Film Club to help start similar initiatives in other parts of the country. And, as the Kriti Film Club received requests for curating film-based events by institutions and people’s movements and enabling similar initiatives across India, we also shared our experience with them and connected them to the filmmakers or co-organized screenings with them.³



Post screening discussion at a public venue on a women's rights documentary.

The Kriti Film Club now also offers documentary filmmaking workshops to community-based non-profits and corporate social responsibility actors, in order to document and showcase their local and grassroots issues and actions independently. The availability of smartphones and social media make it possible for anyone to use the new technologies for social change and the Kriti Film Club considers it crucial to build skills in this area. Documentaries can be used to educate, organize, advocate and resist, not just as viewers but also as filmmakers.

In an effort to retain and provide access to documentary films, early on, the Kriti Film Club had started to build its library and archive of these resources on the one hand; and a few years later, the distribution of documentaries for wider use by academic and social sector organizations and social movements.

The Kriti Film Club has a collection of over nine hundred documentaries in its library and distributes a larger number, in collaboration with the filmmakers. Kriti Film Club is grateful to the independent filmmakers' fraternity for sharing and screening their films in order to reach the civil society, students and general public.

Its distribution platform, Docushop, houses independently-made documentaries that tell stories of struggle, of people and places unknown; books and posters that speak the verse of protest and unveil creative imagery on complex subjects; bookmarks, postcards, badges, etc. that connect people to movements; music that strings across the core and the periphery of com-

munities and artists, popular and activist. The documentaries that cover an expanse of subjects like Caste, Communalism, Development, Displacement, Environment, Globalization, Health, Human Rights, Media, Theater, Women and more are all available here. The Docushop serves as the space for buying these films and is accessible on www.gestures.in.

In 2019, the Kriti Film Club initiated in the financial capital of India, Mumbai, monthly screenings through the Kriti Team volunteers. Screenings were held in a small café space in one of the city's suburbs. It expects to create a similar documentary viewing culture in that city as it has done in Delhi.

What began and ran as a self-initiated activity now needs more human resources and therefore finances; and twenty years later, the Kriti Film Club stands at the crossroads of rethinking its strategy of being a “free screening platform” to a “donation-based screening platform” where filmmakers, producers and audiences are requested to contribute for its continuity. The *Gullaq* (ceramic piggy bank) which invited contributions by the audience during its monthly screenings at its workplace now looks to be transformed into the “Gullaq Audience and Filmmakers Fund.”

Celebrating Two Decades of Sharing #thoughtprovokingcinema

In March 2020, Kriti Film Club started working on the “Kriti Film Club @20” plans with its upcoming birthday on the 5th of August 2020. But the COVID-19 pandemic had other plans in store. On 21 March 2020, the Kriti Film Club decided to post daily Lockdown recommendations of films to give “our minds and hearts a change in these times...to entertain, to calm, to think and feel, to act, connect and share...”⁴

The documentary recommendations were aimed at connecting lockdown citizens to real lives and issues that they may not have been witness to due to their own busyness and the limited (physical) outreach of Kriti Film Club screenings. The lockdown had suddenly opened up the worldwide web as the universe to show documentaries and we did not shy away from the opportunity to do so. The curation of lockdown recommendations was made in a way that it offered the audience a chance to develop empathy and capacity to support the more vulnerable, and “enable us all to make socially sensitive, gender just and sustainable choices.”

Documentary films by professionals and student filmmakers have been recommended for viewing during the lockdown times, including an Oscar

2020 entry, some unreleased films and many films that have won national awards. The documentary recommendation from the month of March 2020 (continued up to 30 June 2020) are on our blog, <https://krititeam.blogspot.com/>:

- Day 1 (21 March 2020): This one to give you calm... *Lake of Peace*;
- Day 2 (22 March 2020): These two films to connect you to the forests! *India's Healing Forest* (Public Service Broadcasting Trust) and *How Forest Heal People*;
- Day 3 (23 March 2020): This one to connect us across divides! *Had Anhad* by Shabnam Virmani;
- Day 4 (24 March 2020): This one to walk with Kabir! *Kabira Khada Bazaar Mein* by Shabnam Virmani
- Day 5 (25 March 2020): This one to follow the Kabir path! *ChaloHumara Des* by Shabnam Virmani;
- Day 6 (26 March 2020): This one to think secular! *Ajab Shaher: Kabir In America*;



**LOCKDOWN
RECOMMENDATIONS**

**'STARRING
SHARMILA TAGORE'**

Directed By:
Umang Sabarwal

Produced By:
Public Service
Broadcasting Trust

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DAY 102
30 JUNE 2020

FILMMAKER SPEAKS

“

Why must we hear the story of the life of Sharmila Tagore? For me the answer to that question is the same as why we tell stories of all great artists. To find meaning & art in our own lives through their stories. To know Sharmila Tagore's journey is to have a better understanding of cinema and women in films as they exist today.

This film is more than just the story of the events of her life, it's a trip to the 60's & the 70's, a film world full of colour, glamour & rock & roll. It is also the story of a woman navigating a world dominated by men, where heroines are meant to be docile creatures that seeked no pleasure of their own. Over the course of making this film I asked myself this question many times. Well, besides all of what this note says above, here's the simple answer. Because it's a really good story!

I have been associated with Kriti Film Club since they were kind enough to screen my student film five years ago. I was happy to see it transition into a new city and now a beautiful online space where films are open for access. In the past months during the lockdown I have been able to see many films that I haven't had access to before. I am really proud to be part of the Kriti family. We need to support places and endeavours like this now more than ever before.

Let open sharing of our stories and thoughts always find a space!

UMANG





PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING TRUST

Kriti Film Club is an independent documentary screening initiative by the non-profit, Kriti team since August 2000.

Day 102 of online Kriti Film Club Lockdown Recommendation.

- Day 7 (27 March 2020): This one on the occasion of World Theatre Day! *Arna's Children* by Juliano Mer Khamis and Danniell Danniell;
- Day 8 (28 March 2020): This one to celebrate women's labor! *Dance with Hands Held Tight* by Krishnendu Bose and Kavita Dasgupta;
- Day 9 (29 March 2020): This one to mark the World Water Day week! *The Miracle Water Village* by Rintu Thomas and Sushmit Ghosh;
- Day 10 (30 March 2020): This one in nostalgia! *One Show Less* by Nayantara Kotian;
- Day 11 (31 March 2020): This one to celebrate "community"! *Mendha Ta Pitto* by Sudhir Aggrawal.

As of 30 June 2020, the Kriti Film Club completed one hundred two days of online documentary recommendations from our archives and some new ones too (with the help of its volunteers and in partnership with the filmmakers). Subsequently, we started "Weekend Watch" in the first week of July. With its twentieth year celebrated in August 2020, the Kriti Film Club hopes to continue bringing new and meaningful insights to diverse audiences across the world, albeit online and offline (as unlock mode becomes safe and possible).

K R I T I F I L M C L U B

LOCKDOWN RECOMMENDATIONS 2020

102

DAYS

116

**DOCUMENTARIES
SCREENED**

DEMOCRACY MIGRATION

TRAVEL DISSENT MUSIC

SEXUALITY HEALTH GENDER FOLK THEATRE

DEVELOPMENT

HUMAN RIGHTS

EMPOWERMENT

MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

HERITAGE EDUCATION COMMUNALISM

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Kriti Film Club is an independent documentary screening initiative by the non-profit organisation, Kriti: a development praxis and communication team, New Delhi and Mumbai. The 'Lockdown Recommendations' series by the Kriti Film Club has successfully screened 116 documentaries over a span of 102 days. Most of the documentaries recommended by us have been screened by the Kriti Film Club over the past two decades. Some others were recommended in consultation with the filmmakers and/ or producers.

If any individual/ organisation requires curation and facilitation of documentary films please get in touch with us on space.kriti@gmail.com



KRITI FILM CLUB PRESENTS

WEEKEND WATCH

India's Official entry to the Oscars
'MOTI BAGH'
(60 MIN/2019/HINDI, ENGLISH)
PRODUCED BY PSBT





National Award Winning
'DREAMING Taj Mahal'
(51 MIN/2010/URDU, HINDI)



Directed By:
Nirmal Ghander

3 JULY 2020 | 6 PM ONWARDS
AVAILABLE ONLY FOR 48 HOURS

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 @KritiFilmClub
 <https://krititeam.blogspot.com>
 space.kriti@gmail.com

Kriti Film Club is an independent documentary screening initiative by the non-profit, Kriti team since August 2000

Reflections on Twenty Years of Existence

The film screenings of Kriti Film Club have had a “trickle-down effect” that translates into post-film discussions and actions afterward. As reported by Sumeet Kaur, one such incident happened after one of the screenings:⁵

After a screening on cows eating plastic, an audience member reached out to the filmmakers, and together they produce[d] and distribute[d] cloth bags to vendors to reduce plastic waste. The reason for such sincere responses, Kapur believes, is that they have “never tried to force an agenda down people’s throats; we are not running the film club as a project. The day we start doing that, we will probably lose whatever we have achieved.”

KRITI
FILM CLUB

#thoughtprovokingcinema

screening Documentaries for
Social Change since 2000

400+ documentary films screened
5000+ people reached
200+ film makers reached
800+ films in Kritis Film Club library

Caste, Communalism, Education,
Development, Displacement, Health,
Environment, Globalisation, Health,
Human Rights, Media, Theatre,
Women and more.

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/kritisfilmclub>
Twitter: <https://twitter.com/kritisfilmclub>

"I had a wonderful experience watching the film and had privileged to be a part of such a discussion. It was inspiring. Looking forward for such efforts in the future!"

— AN AUDIENCE MEMBER

"The reason one makes films is to be able to share them with audiences. Yours was a wonderful one. Many thanks!"

— SHARATI RAJU FILMMAKER

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KRITI
FILM CLUB

#thoughtprovokingcinema

outreach
educate
entertain

<https://kritisfilmclub.blogspot.com>

The spontaneous response of the members of the audience is a valuable part of a Kritis Film Club film screening. The members of the audience have the freedom to express what they think about the films they watch. And if they decide to act on what inspires or affects them, then that extends the impact of the film screening to the community.

Kritis Film Club does not see itself becoming an institution but a large and inclusive space for sharing and discussing documentaries, and triggering necessary social and human rights-based change in society. It sees a lot more potential remains to be tapped in its current form. The dedication of volunteers and the support of documentary filmmakers in fulfilling the objectives of film screenings makes the Kritis Film Club work. As I shared in an interview,⁶

The very fact that somebody asks us for our support is how we sustain ourselves. One can't put in years of effort into something and then suddenly give up because it's not financially profitable. In a nutshell, we sustain ourselves by being mad. And I don't mean 'mad' in a sarcastic way.

I hope that we in Kritis Film Club will retain this madness and continue well into the future.

For further information, please visit the following:

Blog: <https://krititeam.blogspot.com/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/kriti.team/>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/kritifilmclub> and https://www.instagram.com/krititeam_org/

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/kritifilmclub>

Endnotes

1 Sumeet Kaur, "Kriti Film Club: "We Are A Development Support Group, Not A Project," DSSC, 10 January 2018, www.dssc.co/delhi/2018/01/10/kriti-film-club-development-support-group-not-project/.

2 Kaur, *ibid.*

3 *Ibid.*

4 "KRITI FILM CLUB Lockdown recommendations: 21st - 31st March 2020," Kriti Team, <https://krititeam.blogspot.com/2020/05/kriti-film-club-lockdown.html>.

5 Kaur, *op. cit.*

6 Kaur, *ibid.*

